



## W&M ScholarWorks

---

Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects

Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects

---


1995

# Visions of Reality: A Comparison of Narrative Methods and Perspectives in "The Ambassadors" and "The Good Soldier"

Rebecca Marie Kleinberg

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kleinberg, Rebecca Marie, "Visions of Reality: A Comparison of Narrative Methods and Perspectives in "The Ambassadors" and "The Good Soldier"" (1995). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. Paper 1539625981.

<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-mba4-1k50>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

VISIONS OF REALITY: A COMPARISON OF NARRATIVE  
METHODS AND PERSPECTIVES IN  
*THE AMBASSADORS* AND *THE GOOD SOLDIER*

---

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

---

by

Rebecca Kleinberg

1995

Approval Sheet

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Rebecca H. Kleinberg  
Author

Approved, October, 1995

Elsa Nettels  
Elsa Nettels

Thomas Heacox  
Thomas Heacox

Christopher MacGowan  
Christopher MacGowan

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer wishes to thank Professor Elsa Nettels, under whose direction this thesis was written, for her patient guidance and criticism throughout the revisions of this paper. The writer would also like to thank Professors Christopher MacGowan and Thomas Heacox for their careful reading of the manuscript.

## ABSTRACT

In 1903, Henry James published *The Ambassadors*, the novel he deemed “quite the best. . . of all [his] productions” (“Preface” to *The Ambassadors*, 2). James describes the work as a “process of vision” (“Preface” 2) in which the hero, Lambert Strether, comes to “see” that reality and the truth it dictates depend on individual perceptions.

In 1915, Ford Madox Ford, a literary disciple of James, published *The Good Soldier*, the novel he considered his “best book” (“Dedicatory Letter” to *The Good Soldier*, xvii). Permeated by the Jamesian legacy, *The Good Soldier* is also a “process of vision.” Like Strether, John Dowell of *The Good Soldier* learns that reality is not an objective manifestation perceived equally and similarly by everyone. And like Strether, Dowell is called upon to integrate his discoveries into his knowledge of himself and construct a coherent, stable sense of reality and truth from which he can formulate a code of conduct.

But *The Good Soldier* is not simply an imitation of *The Ambassadors*. The circumstances of plot and narration that differentiate Dowell’s quest from Strether’s reveal that Ford did not merely inherit Jamesian artistic principles, but revised and reinterpreted them, producing a singular vision of literary method and perspective. The fundamental difference between the two writers is Ford’s pessimism; for not only does it define his reinterpretation of Jamesian devices, themes, and characterizations, it underscores the optimism that defines James’s work.

That optimism emerges in Strether’s psychological strength and the expanded self-awareness that his discovery of subjective reality engenders. In the end Strether is able to construct a stable sense of truth from which he can make ethical judgments. In contrast, Dowell, psychologically fragile and unable to integrate his discoveries, is overwhelmed and reduced by the realization that reality is not objective; thus he is unable to formulate a firm, balanced sense of truth. The moral ambiguity of his final position represents the culmination of Ford’s pessimism and his essential difference from James.

VISIONS OF REALITY: A COMPARISON OF NARRATIVE  
METHODS AND PERSPECTIVES IN  
*THE AMBASSADORS* AND *THE GOOD SOLDIER*

Of Henry James, Ford Madox Ford wrote, "Mr. James is the greatest of living writers and in consequence the greatest of living men" (*Henry James: A Critical Study*, 9). Ford's admiration of James emerges not only in his critical essays, but in his fiction as well. In what is generally considered Ford's greatest novel, *The Good Soldier* (1915), the influence of James is undeniable and at times pervasive. While *The Good Soldier* is reminiscent of a number of James's works, *The Ambassadors* (1903) is particularly conducive to a comparative study of the narrative methods the two writers employ. *The Good Soldier* exhibits elements of Jamesian settings, devices, themes, and characters that make comparison inevitable. Ford's work, however, does not merely echo; rather, it responds to and reinterprets Jamesian techniques and perspectives.

Both novels are psychological narratives in which crossing the Atlantic Ocean from America to Europe signifies a quest for truth. Lambert Strether of *The Ambassadors* initially sails to Paris as the first ambassador of his patron, Mrs. Newsome, in order to save her son, Chad, from a liaison she assumes is degenerative. But, in Paris, Strether finds Chad a cultivated gentleman in whom the signs of moral decay are conspicuously absent. The lack of those signs, combined with the presence of Chad's suavity, transforms Strether's mission. In consequence of not finding what he expected, Strether must construct a new understanding not only of Paris and his obligation to Mrs. Newsome, but of his life.

Unlike *The Ambassadors*, *The Good Soldier* is a retrospective narrative.



But confounded expectations have a similar effect on its protagonist, John Dowell, in his backward-looking quest for truth. Forced by the unexpected collapse of his "coterie," Dowell must review his understanding of the relationships and experiences that formed the most important decade of his adult life. Whereas Strether must reformulate his method of interpreting the present, Dowell must reinterpret the more distant past, particularly his original view of it. Despite the different time frames of the people, circumstances, and actions they interpret, both Strether and Dowell are Americans confronted by a reality they had not anticipated. This confrontation leads to the realization that reality is not objective and immutable, but subjective: a construct of individual perceptions and judgments. As a result of the subjectivity of reality, truth becomes relative as well.

In "The Art of Fiction," Henry James asserts that "you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being. Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms" (658). Just as reality is difficult to define because of its multiplicity, so is truth because it is contingent on reality. James and Ford demonstrate that truth is never a static construct, but ever-expanding as contact and communication with others offer continuing opportunity for comparison of individual realities. Of course, reality and truth are rarely so easily divided as this definition implies. Indeed, *reality* and *truth* are merely abstracted labels for the cognitive stream that produces them; one merges into and repeatedly reshapes the other as they form a spiraling continuum. While James and Ford

do not define these concepts *per se*, Strether and Dowell demonstrate not only the cognitive functions that construct individual reality and truth, but often a metacognitive awareness of what they are doing. For Strether and Dowell, finding and understanding truth is synonymous with self-awareness. Strether completes his search by accepting his responsibility to make an ethical choice based on what he learns. Thereby Strether exemplifies James's optimistic faith in the human capacity to manage a reality and truth that are contingent on the subject that constructs them. Although Dowell reformulates his personal reality after comparing it to that of others, thereby expanding his sense of truth, he remains, in the end, unequal to the task of composing a coherent reality that enables him to better understand himself and his circumstances. But it is the moral ambiguity of Dowell's final position that demonstrates Ford's pessimism about the human capacity to cope with and act upon the subjectivity of truth. Ford's adaptation of Jamesian techniques is controlled by his pessimism, and therein lies the two author's primary difference.

Both *The Ambassadors* and *The Good Soldier* are related through the limited perspective of their heroes. In the "Preface" to *The Ambassadors*, James terms the "business of" *The Ambassadors* and "the march of [its] action. . .[a] process of vision"--a description that applies to *The Good Soldier* as well (2). John Tytell and Paul Armstrong apply a modified version of James's term to the design of both novels calling them a depiction of the "process of knowledge" (Tytell 369). All information that the reader receives comes through the mind's eye of the hero, which is not to say that the reader can know only as much as

Strether and Dowell. The reader brings his own perception and judgment to their stories. In addition, the reader can reflect on elements of the narratives that Strether and Dowell do not, thereby composing a fictional reality quite different from theirs. In fact, both novels elicit the reader's awareness of his own "process of knowledge." To this end, the reader may form sympathetic identification with Strether and Dowell and become a questing hero himself.

Because Strether and Dowell lack the reader's advantage of stepping away from their stories, they cannot escape the internal upheaval caused by the instability of external reality. The psychological crossing from certainty in objective truth to doubt in the possibility of finding meaningful truth necessarily triggers perplexity and anxiety. Their ability to make choices, particularly ethical choices involving relationships, becomes problematic when they become aware that their moral precepts are grounded not in objective truth, but in the sense of truth that they (and others) have formulated.

In both novels, America, specifically New England, breeds moral certitude and Paris moral crisis. Indeed, in the "Preface" to *The Ambassadors*, James explains that he chose Paris because of "the dreadful little old tradition, one of the platitudes of the human comedy, that people's moral scheme does break down in Paris" (7). But Paris also represents the jewel of European Catholicism. James and Ford place provincial American Protestants amid the realm of sophisticated European Catholics to flesh out the dichotomy between old world and new world moral constructs. Sexual conduct is the pivotal issue that triggers moral crises, but in both novels the ethics of relationships

ultimately run deeper than just the issue of sexual conduct.

The differences between American and European sensibilities complicate the role of interpretation in creating reality. Strether and Dowell experience perplexity when their frame of reference--the assumptions that guide understanding--does not fit their experience. In Paris both protagonists discover that people in whom they have deep emotional investments, people whom they believe they know and understand, are or were engaged in extra-marital affairs. While the course of their discoveries is different, they both face the essential issue of conduct that does not match expectations. That issue arises from the belief that "good" people do not intentionally engage in apparently immoral conduct. And both protagonists are blinded by their belief. Successfully overcoming that blindness requires adjusting the frame of their assumptions, while retaining a balance between internal expectations and external phenomena. The process of attempting to adjust that frame is the primary action of both novels. In their attempts to alter their perspectives, Strether and Dowell underscore the extent to which interpretation determines truth.

By thematizing interpretation, James and Ford convey the elusiveness of meaning. For Strether and Dowell (and the reader) finding truth entails establishing meaning, which is not usually immediately apparent in such complex signs of reality as people, relationships, and conduct. The senses perceive those signs and the mind assigns meaning. But perception and the mind's comprehension are finite; thus the physical, spiritual, and mental

position of the subject necessarily limits any assigning of meaning. Despite these limitations, however, people do create a sense of reality and from it a sense of what is true.

In general terms, Strether and Dowell share character traits that give them similar limitations of perspective. Both men have led somewhat passive lives with no remarkable or exciting successes. Both have largely depended on others for the purpose and means of their existence. Thus they begin their quests from comparable psychological backgrounds. As unassertive bystanders they have formulated parallel moral expectations from which the limitations of their assumptions stem. They diverge, however, in their ability to overcome the obstacles to expanded truth that their expectations create.

One of the most challenging obstacles Strether and Dowell face is the real and perceived absence of signs. They must do interpretive work like that of the artist-as-detective who uses intuition and deduction to interpret pieces of reality that are missing and the reasons they are missing. In "The Art of Fiction," James contends that an artist's "source of strength" is his "power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern" (659). In *The Ambassadors* and *The Good Soldier*, absence ultimately represents the true nature of the relationships Strether and Dowell perceive and attempt to understand. In Strether's world, absence is the result of concealment by others and the self; as such it is an impediment to interpretation that can be overcome through patient observation, communication, and most importantly, perhaps, a readiness to see. Strether's

eventual ability to discover hidden signs manifests James's confidence in the human capacity to interpret reality. In Dowell's world the difference between perceived and real absence is moot because the revelation of one absent sign leads only to greater awareness of absence. In the end, Dowell has detected many of the previously hidden signs that contributed to the wreck of his life, but the fundamental cause of that absence continues to elude him. Ford's pessimism resides in Dowell's irresolvable position. The absence behind which Dowell can never see doubles back on the reader who can never determine if Dowell's failure to see is a result of his unreadiness or the actual and perpetual absence of the fundamental sign that he seeks. Thus Ford extends the Jamesian principle that absence both stimulates and frustrates interpretation to demonstrate that synthesis of these dialectic positions is never achieved.

The idea that absence stimulates interpretation informs the narrative pattern of both novels, but in different ways. Strether seeks missing or hidden information by following a path of inquiry. John Tytell identifies this pattern in *The Ambassadors* as the depiction of a series of "unanswered questions [that] postpone information and prolong Strether's quest" (371). The opening words of the novel are "Strether's first question"; thus from the beginning James sets the rhythm that stabilizes the narrative. Having Strether ask questions in an order he can handle allows him to cope with new ideas at his own pace. In effect, Strether controls the search for truth. By placing Strether in the director's chair, James illustrates his optimism in the human capacity to compose meaningful truth from a subject-centered reality. In fact, James's

manner of presenting Strether affirms and celebrates the process of interpretation that leads to knowledge.

Strether's ability to control his quest reflects James's determination to control the limited perspective of his novel. While James wants "Strether's sense of. . .things. . .his more or less groping knowledge of them" to form the novel, James does not want the narrative reduced to "looseness" by the "romantic privilege of the 'first person'" ("Preface" 8-10). James's object was to concentrate the tale on Strether's changing psychology, to create a sense of intimacy with his hero while avoiding the disunity and monotony that result from "the terrible fluidity of self-revelation" ("Preface" 11). To this end James filters everything through Strether, but retains the omnipotent control afforded by third person narration. Thus, Strether both stars in and directs his story but James is the executive producer.

The supporting cast--Maria Gostrey, Little Bilham, Chad Newsome, and Mme. de Vionnet--to name the most important--are Strether's "confidants" and "aid[s] to lucidity"--the listening characters who assist Strether's story ("Preface" 12). Their role, James explains, is to "wave away with energy the custom of the seated mass of explanation after the fact, the inserted block of merely referential narrative" ("Preface" 11). These characters engage Strether in dialogue, thereby reducing the "menace to a bright variety" of entirely subject-centered internal monologue. Primarily through their role as sounding boards, Maria and company either pose to or elicit from Strether the questions to which he seeks answers.

The variety that the listening characters add to the narrative pattern fulfills James's conception of realistic discovery, both of the self and the external world. In other words, much of what people know of themselves and others derives from spoken interaction. In verbal communication it is incumbent upon the speaker to put his thoughts into order, to arrange his ideas in a form that listeners can understand. The element of unpredictability ever present in verbal interaction often forces the speaker and listener to create coherence where a need for it had not been anticipated. This obligation to make sense on the spur of the moment can be epiphanic in its revelation of the way unreflected parts fit into a whole. Strether's quest for truth includes a series of epiphanic dialogues that lead him through the process of discovery and propel the action of the novel. These dialogues are further evidence of James's confidence in the human psyche's capacity to create meaning.

James's optimism does not preclude hesitation and doubt in Strether; bewildered steps backward often temper the progression of Strether's search. Detailed descriptions of Strether's reflections simultaneously actuate and suspend his protracted, but forward, movement toward an expanded sense of truth. Through the dramatization of Strether's mental and psychological movements, James makes Strether's "consciousness. . . actionable" (Seidel 144). By lingering on Strether's consciousness, James may seem to manipulate narrative structure in order to magnify an artificial process, when in fact he accounts for the time Strether needs to sort through his impressions.

Although the narrative structure of *The Ambassadors* testifies implicitly to



James's optimism, the subject of the novel is the explicit proof of that optimism. From the time Strether checks into the hotel in Liverpool, he exhibits a predisposition toward change, toward the epistemological turn that his mission will take. Strether breathes his first "draught of Europe" enlivened by "such a consciousness of personal freedom as he hadn't known for years; such a deep taste of change and of having above all for the moment nobody and nothing to consider, as promised already, if headlong hope were not too foolish, to colour his adventure with cool success" (17-18). Why is Strether's psyche so open to the transforming influence of Europe? His "dear old" American friend Waymarsh remains, after several months in Europe, immune to its effects. But Strether is "burdened...with the oddity of a double consciousness. . .[a] detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference" that Waymarsh lacks (18). Paul Armstrong points out that in Strether "expectation guides understanding" (70). Strether holds the traditional American assumptions that Europe breeds depravity, while simultaneously seeing the potential for refreshment in its differences. Essential to this "double consciousness," or perhaps part of it, is Strether's abundant imagination~his ability to conceive of another's point of view. In short, Strether's psyche is ripe for the liberating perspectives he encounters in Paris.

Ostensibly, Strether's purpose in Europe is not to free himself from the constraints of American sensibilities, but to reindoctrinate Chad. Strether's quest changes from a mission to repatriate Chad to a search for truth. Strether's "double consciousness" initiates his transformation. Immediately

recognizing that predisposition, Maria Gostrey welcomes him to Europe like a hostess, easing some of his culture shock with her "thorough civili[ty]" (21) while at the same time intriguing him with her unconventionality. But mostly it is Maria's knowing eyes that lure Strether to her:

the eyes of Strether's friend most showed him. . .the mistress of a hundred cases or categories, receptacles of the mind, subdivisions for convenience, in which, from a full experience, she pigeon-holed her fellow-mortals with a hand as free as that of a compositor scattering type. . .He had quite the sense that she knew things he didn't, and though this was a concession that in general he found not easy to make to women, he made it now as good-humouredly as if it lifted a burden. (21-22)

Maria's knowledge does lift a burden; she demonstrates for Strether the art of deduction: filling in the puzzle pieces that are missing from the pieces that are present. In Armstrong's words she is a "model of the illuminating imagination for Strether to emulate" (82). Maria's interest in Strether's original mission is not so much how he will repatriate Chad--she understands the tactics of family pressure and money well enough. Rather, Maria's questions focus on why Chad appears not to want to return to Woollett. What in Woollett repels Chad at the same time that something in Paris compels him? This apparently simple act of viewing Chad's situation from a different point of inquiry--the why question as opposed to the how question--frames Strether's task anew. Maria's vantage challenges Strether, triggering "uncontrolled perceptions. . .as a

starting-point for fresh backward, fresh forward, fresh lateral flights" (42). Thus Maria prepares Strether to appreciate Chad.

In grooming Strether as a detective, Maria "cost[s]" him his "past--in one great lump" (40). If Maria's questions prompt Strether to consider Chad's situation from a new angle, they also induce him to examine his own life. The epiphanic spirit of dialogue, in which Strether answers Maria's inquiries, unveils to Strether the suffocating restrictions of the Woollett world view. By the end of "Part One," she has made him recognize and acknowledge his fear of life--that prison that he makes for himself by "always considering something else. . .than the thing of the moment" (26). Strether fears the "sacred rage" of Woollett: that strict moral code through which Mrs. Newsome would view Strether's association with Maria as a transgression. Insofar as transgression equates to crossing from a limited American perspective to the realization that other perspectives are possible, Strether does transgress. He happily agrees to "pay" Maria with his "last penny" for her "illuminations," her guidance, and her powers as a muse (40). She intensifies his yearning for freedom from the restrictive world view imposed by Woollett and his obligation to the Newsomes.

Chad accelerates Strether's psychological crossing and reshaping. It is precisely Chad's own transformation that so influences Strether. Rather than showing the physical and spiritual signs of moral corruption that Paris supposedly wreaks on innocent Americans, Chad embodies suave affability, maturity, and a "way" of handling himself, which Strether reluctantly concedes is "wonderful" (91). Chad's migration has made him over into a man whom

Strether not only likes, but admires. Among the differences in Chad that Strether observes is Chad's lack of "resemblance" to his mother (92). It is remarkable to Strether that a "young man's face and air [could] disconnect themselves [so] completely. . . from any imaginable aspect of a New England female parent" (92). Even more impressive to Strether than the change itself is the possibility that anyone could break so completely free of Mrs. Newsome and the "sacred rage." If Maria is the model of expanded vision, Chad is the symbol of the liberated life that such vision brings.

With such positive role models, what, then keeps Strether from totally immersing himself in the liberating spirit of Paris? Namely, it is the "double consciousness" that enables Strether to appreciate Maria and Chad. If Strether is graced by his capacity to enjoy Paris, he is also damned by it. His appetite for Paris derives precisely from his American sensibilities. Paris is the fruit that his New England mores forbid him to taste, which places Strether in the paradoxical position of craving that of which he is most wary. Strether's suspicions take aim at Chad, who has partaken of the enigmatic knowledge and freedom that Paris engenders. Strether's obligation to Mrs. Newsome, who is, in effect, the absent personification of Strether's provincial conscience, tempers his admiration of Chad. Although Strether experiences many perplexities and doubts at the hands of Chad, one certainty that Strether does have is Mrs. Newsome's disapproval of Chad and Paris. With the distance of an ocean separating them, Strether is able to rationalize his betrayal of Mrs. Newsome and the moral restrictiveness that she personifies, but he cannot escape it

entirely. The "sacred rage" is ingrained in Strether's being, so that "the intensely personal and complex drive to absorb qualities one lacks or discard qualities one abhors is often frustrated by defenses and loyalties that one carries as a part of a national baggage" (Seidel 141). Extirpating the "sacred rage" entirely would be nearly impossible and as fatal as removing a vital organ. Strether "hangs fire" from complete conversion to Paris and all that it personifies, because he must to survive.

Merely surviving, though, is what Strether laments in the most famous speech in the novel. At Gloriani's garden party, with the panorama of pulsing, "wonderful" life before him, Strether urges Bilham, "live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what *have* you had?" (132). All that Strether has missed flashes before his eyes in a sort of death-in-life review of his life. The fear of risk that has dulled him into complacency haunts him. Strether's musing that he "was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have" (132) a full life rings true of his "double consciousness." He has seen too much, in that the hyper moral sensitivity of Woollett scrutinizes every action; and he has seen too little, in that the scrutiny is from such a limited point of view. While Strether addresses his speech to Bilham, who doesn't need it, Strether's words are really for his own ears. The remainder of the novel is the test of his assertion that "the right time" to seize life "is *any* time that one is still so lucky as to have" (132).

Earlier in his speech about "the affair of life," about missed opportunities,

and risks not taken, Strether concedes that much of what people call living is "the illusion of freedom" to pursue a satisfying life (132). He goes on to add that "the memory of that illusion" is better than no illusion at all (132).

Obviously this statement manifests Strether's equation of freedom to life. And though his assertion seems incompatible with his quest for truth, it perhaps evidences Strether's subconscious realization that reality is a personal construct. Almost unintentionally, Strether raises one of the most complicated issues that James explores, which is essentially the question: If one believes himself free, regardless of the accuracy of that belief, isn't one really free? The insoluble dialectic initiated by this inquiry provides much of the underlying tension in *The Ambassadors* and ultimately it is the hinge on which Strether's final ethical choice turns. Strether's final ethical decision to forsake Maria illustrates James's conclusion that belief in perception, i.e. subjective reality, can result in a resolution that preserves integrity.

True to the Jamesian legacy Ford inherits, Dowell poses a question in *The Good Soldier* that is much the same:

If for nine years I have possessed a goodly apple that is rotten at the core and discover its rottenness only in nine years and six months less four days, isn't it true to say that for nine years I possessed a goodly apple? (14)

Dowell's inquiry throws a twist into Strether's by changing the elements of the equation. While Strether asks about freedom and life, Dowell focuses on the narrow opposition between belief and knowledge. The apple, as the proverbial

metaphor for knowledge, symbolizes the figuratively prelapsarian state of naive trust in which Dowell existed before the collapse of the "little four-square coterie" (*The Good Soldier* 13). He believed that he knew his wife, Florence, and the Ashburnhams, who were "what in England it is the custom to call 'quite good people,'" (12) but he finds that he had "known the shallows," (11) a simulacrum of the people he counted most dear and most intimate to him. In his deluded assumption of a knowledge he did not actually possess, Dowell was happy, or at least content. Disabused of his illusions, Dowell faces not only an entirely new understanding of himself and his former friends, but the realization that his former happiness and security were invalid because they rested on a cracked foundation. Dowell has arrived at the other side of the illusion that Strether considers better than complacency and failure. The problem for Dowell is that his illusion was bred of complacency and failure, and now that he no longer has the chimera of his "minuet de la cour" he must learn again how to live (13).

Their positions on opposite sides of the illusion bespeak the psychological difference between Strether and Dowell. Strether's question treats the illusion as a means of expanding one's life. He uses illusion as an emotional buttress that gives him the courage to have new encounters, consider challenging possibilities, and face difficult choices--all experiences that widen and deepen his awareness of varying realities, and ultimately himself. Dowell uses illusion as an emotional fortress that allows him to shut out life's frightening, but potentially enlightening experiences. In short, Dowell uses illusion to avoid not only

reality, but life, and himself. Therein lies the difference in the outcomes of Strether's and Dowell's quests. Strether's search for the truth is propelled by psychological strength, while Dowell's is undermined by psychological fragility.

That Dowell's vulnerability steers the course of his search is particularly evident in the questions he poses. Rather than stabilizing his progress or demonstrating control, as Strether's questions do, Dowell's questions rush out of him as a gesture of frustration and utter bewilderment. When he reaches a psychological impasse in his attempts to relate and put into some order the wreck of his "tranquil life," Dowell resorts to unanswerable inquiries that threaten to upset his precarious mental balance. Dowell's frequent response of "I don't know" to his own wonderings becomes the guiding refrain of his narrative. "Chapter One" ends with a deluge of questions that illustrate Dowell's desperation:

I don't know. And there is nothing to guide us. And if everything is so nebulous about a matter so elementary as the morals of sex, what is there to guide us in the more subtle morality of all other personal contacts, associations, and activities? Or are we meant to act on impulse alone? It is all a darkness. (18)

Unlike Strether, Dowell perceives himself as alone and shrouded in darkness as ethical ambiguities assail him. He prefaces his questions with the answer "I don't know" as an ineffective defense against the menace of instability and uncertainty.

A similar passage in *The Ambassadors* casts Strether in a position parallel



to Dowell's, but with an entirely different perspective. About Chad's presumed liaison with a woman in Paris, Waymarsh asks Strether: ". . .what the devil *do* you know?" Strether "almost gaily" answers: "I guess I don't know anything!" (72). The narrator qualifies Strether's "gaiety" as "a tribute to the fact that the state he had been reduced to. . .was somehow enlarging" (72). Immediately recognizable is Strether's fearlessness of the unknown. Indeed, his mental blank causes exhilaration, for in "reducing" him it creates the space that will accommodate the wealth of his discoveries. Strether sees the unknown as an invitation to learn "anything about anything" (72). His acceptance of that invitation demonstrates his fortitude.

Strether's psychological strength is also evident in the narrative perspective of the novel. Although *The Ambassadors* and *The Good Soldier* are both limited to the perspectives of their heroes, a fundamental difference in their narrative circumstances underpins the polarity of their psychological positions. Both James and Ford strike a balance between sympathy and distance, but their methods of achieving this balance are different. Much of the strength that characterizes Strether derives from the support of his reliable, omniscient narrator. Through third person narration, James affords a double perspective that encourages the reader to invest in Strether's quest, but concurrently keeps the reader in the position of witness to Strether's perplexities and revelations. Dowell, on the other hand, relates his quest directly, through a first person voice that gives the reader an uncensored view of his vulnerability. While Ford withholds the stability created by third person

narration, his frequent ironization of Dowell's perspective enables the reader to observe and judge the fuller reality that Dowell refuses or is unable to see. Thus Dowell's psychological fragility is the very means by which Ford allows the reader to create a double perspective thereby achieving a balance between sympathy and distance.

By withholding omniscient perspective Ford also forces the reader to experience Dowell's interpretive dilemma. In the first chapter the reader learns not what has shattered Dowell's stability, only that it has left him knowing "nothing--nothing in the world--of the hearts of men" and "alone--horribly alone" (14). In pain-ridden confusion Dowell describes the "breaking up of [his] little four-square coterie" (13), but omits the cause of its collapse. Rather than seeing the cause, the reader sees only the effect, which is Dowell's overwhelming grief and perplexity. Dowell's omission of the cause compels the reader to experience the frustration of interpretation stimulated by absence. Throughout the course of the narrative the reader eventually sees more than Dowell, but the purpose of the first chapter has already been accomplished. That purpose is to make the reader aware of absence, of the missing pieces that force him to interpret so that he can try to make sense of Dowell's story.

Dowell strives to conjure an atmosphere of intimacy, both emotional and physical, by welcoming the reader with soothing words. The "I" that conveys the tale of *The Good Soldier* relentlessly saturates every angle of the narrative, closing the distance between the subject reading the novel and the fictional subject writing the novel. Frank Nigro explains that "Ford asks us not merely

to read Dowell's narration: he wants us to hear and see it" (383). Eventually the sympathy that Dowell arouses is mediated by the images he uses to arouse it. Dowell begins the second chapter by asking the reader to bear with him in his narrative search for a safe harbor in which he can anchor the reconstruction of his life.

So I shall just imagine myself for a fortnight or so at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me. And I shall go on talking, in a low voice while the sea sounds in the distance and overhead the great black flood of wind polishes the bright stars. (19)

The sense of isolation and smallness generated by the images of a remote setting amid the primordial sounds of the sea and the enveloping presence of the dark sky exposes Dowell's feelings of inadequacy and confusion. Although Ford's narrator often seems inept in his attempts to tell a coherent story, the atmosphere that he creates so accurately reflects his psychology that Dowell's fumbblings suggest he is attempting to draw the reader into his self-delusion. If Dowell's tone of familiarity and vulnerability initially stirs sympathy in the reader, it eventually arouses doubt as well.

Dowell's fumbblings and confusion result in an erratic narrative that compels the reader to interpret not only Dowell's story, but his competence as a storyteller. Kathryn Rentz describes Dowell's narrative as "a chaotic, violent novel quite different from the comparatively tidy and restrained Jamesian works" (104). Violence and chaos reside not only in events such as the suicides

of Florence and Edward, and Maisie's grotesquely comic demise, but in the narrative structure itself. Dowell's telling of the "saddest story [he has] ever heard" often verges on incoherence, becoming so difficult to follow at times that Dowell seems barely sane. The first paragraph of "Chapter Three" exemplifies Dowell's haphazard style of story telling. He begins the chapter with a reference to the date and Florence as a patient "taking the baths" at Nauheim (26).

Distracted by the concept of patienthood, Dowell contemplates himself as a patient, then he considers the surroundings that make one feel naked at public resorts and the "polished up" tidiness of such places. The image of tidiness leads Dowell to recount the careful arrangement of everything at Englischer Hof, and finally "the exact" number of paces one takes to get from the Englischer Hof to the fountain. In this passage and throughout the novel, seemingly insignificant details constantly derail Dowell's attempts to narrate the action of the central characters and events of the "saddest story." His digressions bespeak his desire to avoid focusing on the wreck of the coterie, even though he claims that his purpose is to understand and explain its collapse. Dowell's narrative method is often that of the artist who fills in the details surrounding the central image, while leaving the image itself blank or only partially filled in. His acute focus on peripheral elements results in a discontinuity that distorts the reader's view of the narrative.

The fragmented structure of Dowell's narrative becomes the guiding pattern (or nonpattern) of the novel. Initially, Dowell's endeavor to interpret the people and circumstances of his life pulls the reader into his hermeneutic

circle, thereby instilling sympathy. Eventually, however, Dowell's interpretative strategies undercut the reader's; subsequently, the reader doubts the reliability of Dowell's narrative voice, and recovers objectivity through that doubt.

The confusion and doubt that Dowell's narrative generates have fueled critical debate about his reliability as a narrator. Mark Schorer asserts that Dowell is not credible because he cannot distinguish between appearances and reality, so he cannot accurately portray the past. Schorer attributes Dowell's distortion of the past (whether intentional or not) to his unacknowledged bitterness about "the paltry destiny that, he thinks, life has forced upon him" (xii). Other critics, beginning with Patricia McFate and Bruce Golden and extending to Roger Poole, plot the many discrepancies in Dowell's time scheme to show that his reliability is questionable. But Samuel Hynes and Hugh Kenner view Dowell's fallibility as the "norm" and essential to Ford's overall technical strategy. According to Kenner, who casts Dowell as the pawn of Ford's reluctance to "resolve the book," *The Good Soldier* lacks a "center" (168). Rather than finding a stable perspective, "one is driven through ironic mirror-lined corridors of viewpoint reflecting viewpoint. . .an optical illusion of infinite recession" (Kenner 168). Kenner ascribes the constantly shifting orientation of the novel to Ford's own indecision about the "situation he presents" (168). Ford's excessive "compassion" for his hero arises from his "impasse of sympathy for all sides" (Kenner 168). Hence, Dowell can never find an anchoring point of view because Ford cannot. While Kenner accurately assesses the multiplicity of viewpoints as the central theme of the novel, he identifies Dowell too closely

with his creator, shifting the indictment of unreliability from Dowell to Ford. In giving Dowell a free hand in telling his story, Ford intentionally allows Dowell's lapses in accuracy, insight, and judgment. Those lapses and the lack of an anchoring viewpoint are entirely Dowell's irresolvable position. The absence of a center in Dowell's narrative reflects his perception of the world as a chaotic place unguided by a composing, objective set of rules. Dowell's vacillations, such as his vehement condemnation of Edward's extra-marital affairs followed by his energetic defenses of Edward's passionate nature, reflect Dowell's inability to find within himself a framework of ethics around which to build his understanding of himself and the world.

If anything, Ford achieves greater distance from his narrator by permitting Dowell's fragility to corrupt his voice. The "fluidity of self-revelation" against which James guarded his authorial control is the very means by which Ford achieves his control. James's sympathy for Strether, though strenuously veiled in third person omniscience, becomes apparent in Strether's achieving a unified identity and effective interpretive strategy amid the unstable signs of reality that confront him. While the "looseness" of Dowell's narrative suggests Ford's sympathy for Dowell, simultaneously it signifies that Ford maintains enough distance from his narrator to portray the obstacles, both internal and external, that impede a person's attempts to understand himself and the world. Hence, Dowell's weaknesses and failings convey Ford's detachment.

Dowell's psychological fragility is both the cause and result of factors that

are more challenging than those Strether encounters. One complication in Dowell's quest is temporality. Unlike Dowell, Strether seeks to understand signs of reality which unfold in the present, so that while he experiences some anxiety about the future, he has the opportunity to control or change the circumstances of his life. Strether's "double consciousness" does cause him psychological conflict and at times self-delusion, but, in its most negative form, it is a safety valve that allows him to progress through his story at a pace that he can handle emotionally and mentally. Moreover, he can use the self-awareness that he develops in the process of his search to influence his relationships and the events surrounding them. In other words, Strether can move forward because both his actions and interpretation take place in the present where they can be integrated. Hence, Strether has the benefit of influencing reality so that it actually fits his interpretation, rather than the reverse.

In contrast, the most important events that Dowell seeks to understand occurred in the past. The knowledge that Dowell gains will never enable him to alter the relationships and circumstances that he is examining. Indeed, three of the players are dead and one is insane, so he does not have the advantage of going back to replay his role if the reality disturbs him; he can only reinterpret it. Literally, Dowell can only sit in the present while he tries to reinterpret the past. Challenged by the constraints of time, Dowell cannot move forward and think of the future until he resolves the past. To accomplish that task Dowell must shape three versions of the past into one coherent, unified sense of reality

that allows for its multiplicity of sides. He must puzzle through his original experience of the past, obviously a construct of naivete and illusion; his view of Edward's romanticized but "mournful" perspective; and finally his awareness of the less rose-colored, but undoubtedly more cynical version offered by Edward's widow, Leonora. All of these versions culminate in Dowell's "redefinitions of events" (Hood 450), which he decides to tell as a "story" (19). Primarily, it is Leonora's version that necessitates Dowell's reconciliation of past illusion to present disillusionment. For it is from Leonora that he gets "the news" of Florence's suicide and Edward's infidelities "full in the face" (100). The events that Dowell learns of are violent not only in themselves, but in their effect on his already fragile psychology. First, he learns that Florence did not die of heart failure, but committed suicide. What is more, the revelation of her affair with Edward means that she manipulated Dowell with a tangle of deceptions. Yet, more tragic for Dowell is the discovery that his "good soldier," Edward Ashburnham, is not the role model for which Dowell took him. Initially, Edward supports Dowell's illusion of the world as an ordered place in which a code of conduct guides actions and thoughts. In being "the cleanest looking sort of chap;--an excellent magistrate, a first rate soldier, one of the best landlords. . .just exactly the sort of chap that you could have trusted your wife with," Edward personifies Dowell's version of the "sacred rage" (18). At the same time, though, Dowell perceives Edward as a sort of Chad figure with the bearing of a gentleman and an enigmatic knowledge "that seemed to drop out of the blue sky" (30). Dowell, with so much of his own identity and security invested in the image of Edward



as a "good soldier," resists abandoning that image. And so Dowell, with his own brand of the "sacred rage" and his own Chad figure, is afflicted by his own "double consciousness." In Dowell's case, the conflicting desires and emotions it produces suspend him in time. He would like to cling to his illusion of the past in order to preserve the stability and order of his internal and external world, but Leonora's disclosures preclude this. Short of blocking out her revelations entirely, Dowell cannot avoid the "facts." To construct a coherent, unified story, Dowell must admit and accept not only his role as dupe, but also a world in which codes of conduct do not signify actual conduct--appearances do not signify reality.

Dowell's denial of emotional conflict indicates his unreadiness to forfeit pretenses for reality. Less than halfway through his narratives he asserts, directly to the reader, that he is numb.

You ask how it feels to be a deceived husband. Just Heavens, I do not know. It feels just nothing at all. It is not Hell, certainly it is not necessarily Heaven. So I suppose it is the intermediate stage. What do they call it? Limbo. No, I feel nothing at all about that.

(68)

On the next page, Dowell follows this denial with the admission: "I hate Florence. I hate Florence with such a hatred that I would not spare her an eternity of loneliness" (69). Passages such as these bring Dowell's reliability into question, for he is in limbo, but it is not the result of no feeling; rather it emerges from an excess of contradictory emotions that Dowell cannot resolve.

He consistently portrays Florence with bitterness for her deceptions, but he cannot conclusively condemn Edward for his. Dowell fluctuates, first blaming, then excusing, then trying to understand Edward's deceptions. While Dowell's vacillating emotions are not negative in themselves, his denial of them and the resulting lack of self-awareness contribute to his inability to understand and move beyond the past.

Fear is the fundamental emotion that drives Dowell, for it is the source of his self-delusion. He repeatedly claims that he received his first knowledge of Florence's infidelity and suicide a week after Edward's death, but much of his narrative belies his claim. His self-deception becomes particularly apparent during his narration of the scene at the castle of M-. His first reference to Florence's displacement of Leonora is metaphorical: he recalls seeing "a brown cow hitch its horns under the stomach of a black and white animal and the black and white one. . . thrown right into the middle of a narrow stream" (44). Dowell remembers distinctly his amusement at the scene as he "chuckled over it from time to time for the whole rest of the day" (44) and his lack of pity for "the poor animal" because he was "out for enjoyment" (45). The reader, at least, equates the cows to Florence and Leonora, even though Dowell never directly links them. His failure to realize the symbolism of the scene might be attributed to his naivete, but his pointed admission of enjoyment suggests that on some level he was aware that pretension was a veil for treachery and refused to let it disrupt his "pleasant" life.

The scene in which Leonora nearly reveals the affair between Edward

and Florence more forcefully indicates Dowell's resistance to acknowledging the truth. Dowell recalls that when Florence "laid one finger upon Captain Ashburnham's wrist" he "was aware of something treacherous, something frightful, something evil in the day" (46). The scene drives Leonora to the verge of fully disclosing the affair. Clutching Dowell's arm she beseeches him: "Don't you see? . . . don't you see what's going on?" (47). But she retreats from the admission, apparently because she recognizes the "panic" in Dowell's eyes (47). Regardless of what Leonora realizes about Dowell, he gives the reader an uncensored view of his paralyzing terror of the truth.

She looked me straight in the eyes; and for a moment I had the feeling that those two blue discs were immense, were overwhelming, were like a wall of blue that shut me off from the rest of the world. I know it sounds absurd; but that is what it did feel like.  
(47)

In this recollection Dowell reveals what he fears most about consciously knowing that Florence is having an affair with Edward; he fears isolation. The truth, as it is contained in Leonora's eyes, takes on the threatening fathomlessness of an ocean that will drown any hope of reemerging.

To Leonora's anticlimactic substitute for the horrible truth, "don't you know that I'm an Irish Catholic?" Dowell confesses

Those words gave me the greatest relief that I have ever had in my life. They told me, I think, almost more than I have ever gathered at any one moment--about myself. I don't think that before that

day I had ever wanted anything very much except Florence. (48)

Oddly, Dowell's admission is true, though he tries to characterize his desire for Florence as only the satisfied yearning for "at once a wife and unattained mistress" in whom he found his "occupation. . .career. . .ambition" (50). The truth of his admission, however, runs deeper than he acknowledges; for Florence is the consummate actress who defends pretense from truth. If Edward embodies the code of conduct that gives order to Dowell's world, Florence is the protector of that code. Thus Florence's deceptions serve Dowell as much as they serve her. By pretending a heart condition, Florence includes him in the pretense of the code, providing him with a script to follow, a role to play. Life without a script, Dowell fears, is life without stability, life without relationships; in short, life alone.

Lydia Gabbay characterizes Dowell as not just a willingly deceived husband, but an accomplice to the deception. Proof of Dowell's complicity is his narration of the Piere Vidal and La Louvre story, "in which a rich husband pushes his wife into the arms of a troubadour" (Gabbay 444). When portraying Edward, Dowell refers to him as Le Chevalier Bayard, the Cid, and Lohengrin--all romantic figures. Gabbay argues that Ford's "adherence to the principle of *le mot juste* would preclude the possibility of the use of either this story or the romantic appellations attached to Edward unless they were meant to illustrate something" (444). Despite professions of innocence, Dowell makes his complicity to the deception obvious. The reasons for his collusion in the code of pretenses that cast him as a fool are also in evidence as they place him in an

imprisoning paradox from which he cannot escape.

For Dowell, the absence of an immutable code that "guides. . .personal contacts, associations, and activities" makes relationships impossible. After the wreck of his illusions, the bewildered Dowell frequently asks "who in this world can give anyone a character? Who in this world knows anything of any other heart--or of his own?" (144). The answer which he formulates in the first pages of his narrative illustrates the paradoxical position from which he cannot escape.

I know nothing--nothing in the world--of the hearts of men. I only know that I am alone--horribly alone. No hearthstone will ever again witness, for me, friendly intercourse. No smoking room will ever be other than peopled with incalculable simulacra amidst smoke wreaths. Yet, in the name of God, what should I know if I don't know the life of the hearth and of the smoking-room, since my whole life has been passed in those places? (15)

The irony of course is that before the collapse of his coterie, Dowell was surrounded by inscrutable people hidden behind the veil of polite conduct. He comes to realize that "the modern English habit of taking every one for granted--is a good deal to blame" (39) for "the damnable nuisance of. . .never really get[ting] an inch deeper than" knowing the proper eating, drinking, and bathing habits of his company (40). But without a code of conduct it is not possible to know people at all, because "the collection of rules" allows people to meet and "know at once whether [they] are concerned with good people or with

those who won't do" (40); hence, the paradox of Dowell's position is that if he abandons the code, he'll never make acquaintances that relieve his isolation. The only experience Dowell has outside the pretense of the code leaves him equally nonplussed. If Dowell did not know the "real" Edward (or Florence, or Leonora) because the "good" image shrouded him, Dowell knows him even less after Leonora lifts the veil of that image. Thus, the ocean of truth in Leonora's eyes does set Dowell afloat, washing him ashore on an island of isolated confusion and doubt. Having only a deluded sense of truth, however, has an equally isolating effect.

The understanding of the coterie that Dowell seeks through his narrative eludes him in part because the cast of the coterie is no longer available to him. Their absence foregrounds a fundamental difference between Dowell's quest and Strether's quest. Dowell does not have the benefit of dialogue that Strether does. Ostensibly, this lack results from the constraining past on which Dowell focuses. Aside from the absence of dialogue in the present, relatively little dialogue exists in his recollections either. About communication with Florence, Dowell admits that he "had to head conversations, for all those eleven years, off such topics as love, poverty, crime, and so on" to protect her weak heart (84). As a foursome the Ashburnhams and the Dowells spent

nine years of uninterrupted tranquility. . . characterized by an extraordinary want of any communicativeness on the part of the Ashburnhams to which [the Dowells] replied by leaving out quite as extraordinarily, and nearly as completely, the personal note.

Indeed, you may take it that what characterized [their] relationship was an atmosphere of taking everything for granted. (37)

The underpinning rule of "good" conduct is "taking everything for granted."

On the surface the rule guarantees understanding without communication.

Essentially, however, the rule demands silence, so that no one discovers that the coterie is actually "a prison full of screaming hysterics, tied down so that they might not outsound the rolling of . . . carriage wheels," or upset the social order (14). To participate in his society, Dowell must adhere to the vow of silence.

Ironically, what he does to avoid isolation in turn isolates him. In addition it not only prevents him from knowing his friends, but makes him afraid of either pursuing or gaining knowledge of them, or himself. The absence of verbal interaction also allows Dowell to retreat behind his confusion and fear, and avoid a wider sense of truth. Dowell does not have the advantage of response that Strether does; Strether's listening characters challenge him to make sense, to be clear. Dowell has only his "silent reader," and so he does not feel the pressure to account for his inconsistencies or to overcome incoherence in relating to others.

To be sure, the dialogue in *The Ambassadors* isn't always illuminating, nor does it always forge a bond. Some of Strether's dialogues lead to misunderstandings. In the world of *The Ambassadors* people also conceal and delude themselves. When Strether asks Little Bilham of Chad: "Why isn't he free if he's good?" (112), Little Bilham responds: "Because it's a virtuous attachment" (112). This is the answer Strether wants to hear. Little Bilham

does not lie to Strether *per se*; his meaning of *virtuous* is different from Strether's, but Little Bilham knows that Strether assumes *virtuous* to mean *chaste*. In exchanges such as these, James illustrates the perils of using language to gain knowledge. Ironically, the danger is of taking too much for granted--the same danger that threatens Dowell, albeit in noncommunicativeness. However, in Jamesian settings, language that hides or distorts truth does not entirely negate the efficacy of communication. Despite the misunderstandings that language can cause, it is ultimately indispensable to Strether's quest for knowledge. Understanding other people demands communication as well as observation. In the long run, Strether benefits from verbal interaction in his many conversations with Maria, and in the ethical choice he makes based on the knowledge he achieves.

James also illustrates that the distortion or concealment of truth that can occur in verbal interaction is sometimes necessary. That is to say, James implies that a certain amount of deception or protection from the full truth is essential to the process of expanding knowledge. If discovery of the truth requires some measure of deception to regulate and insure the process, that deception is a cooperative interaction between deceiver and deceived. James and Ford demonstrate that Strether and Dowell are deceived because they need to be deceived. Their agreement to accept equivocations and prevarications is subconscious, but nonetheless the deception requires their participation. In other words, deception is an implied agreement between the participants to portion off truth into pieces that are manageable for both the giver and



receiver. Implicitly this means that "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" is self-negating, for were the whole truth immediately offered Strether and Dowell, they would be unable to process and digest any part of its overwhelming substance and therefore would abandon it entirely.

For both Strether and Dowell, deception is a protective device, much like a life jacket, but they respond to and use it differently. The deception that Chad and Marie de Vionnet play on Strether is a protective measure necessary to Strether's quest for truth. They distract Strether from the true nature of their relationship in order to gain time for themselves and to enable Strether to see their relationship from their point of view. And in the end their deception aids Strether, for it allows him to resist his "impulse to draw back from the ugly or disturbing" and "feel morally justified in" participating in their lives (Nettels 49). But Strether reaches a point in the process of knowledge where he does not need the protection of self-delusion. When he discovers that Chad and Marie de Vionnet are lovers he is not devastated by their deception. Indeed, the discovery strengthens his resolve to double his efforts at promoting Marie de Vionnet above Chad's obligations in Woollett.

Dowell, on the other hand, never overcomes his fear of truth and so he never removes the buoying self-protection of his illusions. In the end he asserts that he "loved Edward Ashburnham" because Edward was Dowell himself (227). All of Dowell's narrative belies this claim, but he clings to it rather than accept Edward's betrayal of their friendship. Hence, Strether and Dowell wade amid truth to varying degrees. Strether, in the end, can look more deeply into and

enjoy more fully the freedom, the confidence, the expanded consciousness that discovery of the truth brings. Dowell enlarges his sense of truth, but he continues to panic when its depth becomes unfathomable, clinging to his self-delusion in order to keep from drowning. Dowell touches the surface of truth, but always draws back from its depth to gasp for the air of deception that sustains his shallow self-knowledge and identity.

The extent to which Strether and Dowell realize integrity measures the success of their quest for truth and self-awareness. In the end they are both called upon to make ethical choices based on the sense of reality they have composed. Their choices manifest their ability or inability to be true to themselves while relating to others in good faith. Maintaining this balance requires recognizing and accepting reality as a subjective construct that is saved from total self-absorption by the need to understand other points of view. The assumption of responsibility is inherent in this achievement.

Strether's final two choices demonstrate his integrity and hence his success. After learning that Chad and Mme. de Vionnet are lovers, Strether does not abandon his view of their relationship as beneficial to Chad, nor his view of Mme. de Vionnet as "wonderful." Rather than cutting his losses (i.e. in order to keep the patronage of Mrs. Newsome), Strether renews his vow to "save" Mme. de Vionnet. This is not to say that Strether continues under the spell of Mme. de Vionnet's enigmatic charm; indeed, he sees that her charm is a heroic effort to conceal, not the immorality of her relationship with Chad, but the pathos of her situation--her unrequited commitment to Chad, a man

unworthy of her devotion. And even though Chad's abandonment of Mme. de Vionnet reveals his "carefully controlled callousness and selfishness" (Nettels 48), Strether does not regret his campaign to make Sarah Pocock see the value of the liaison. Despite betrayal, Strether maintains sympathy for Mme. de Vionnet's self-defeating love, Chad's inability to see that what he is forfeiting has greater value than his shares in the family business, and Sarah's morally myopic indignation at Strether's defense of Mme. de Vionnet. By becoming aware of and expanding beyond the limited world view of the "sacred rage," Strether deepens his appreciation of the trials of the human heart and mind. In so doing, he locates the source and validity of multiple perspectives.

At the same time, Strether gains certainty in his own perspective, his own sense of ethical conduct. Like Chad, he forsakes a "wonderful" woman--Maria. Unlike Chad, however, Strether realizes all that he is forfeiting. But the ethics of Strether's choice arise not from forsaking Maria so that "out of the whole affair" he has not gotten "anything" for himself (344); rather, the ethic arises from his commitment to learn all that he could of the truth and make a judgment based on that knowledge. His success and his ethical integrity spring from his determination to "make one's account with what one lights on" (306). Myler Wilkinson explicates the logic of Strether's "ethical moment" (153) as the acceptance of responsibility to read the "text" or the situation as closely as possible despite the myriad interpretations that make reality "centerless" or without an objective, external set of composing laws. If the first obligation of ethical conduct is to judge all available information, the second is to use that

knowledge in good faith in relationships. Through his "only logic" (344) Strether perceives himself as bound to the principle that his services not be self-serving, thus he is obliged not to gain Maria from Mrs. Newsome's loss of himself.

One can argue that Strether's expanded knowledge and the ethical conduct that derives from it leave him more isolated from his fellow beings. Practically speaking, Strether's journey does result in his aloneness. He forfeits Mrs. Newsome and Maria. This fact would seem to undercut the contention that James's vision of the human capacity to find meaning and formulate ethics is optimistic. But if James demonstrates that ethical conduct makes relationships more difficult, he also implies that it makes them more stable in the sense that they are founded on deeper understanding.

Dowell's final two choices involve relationships as well. His first decision, though it concludes the novel, is to allow Edward to commit suicide. Dowell chooses not to "hinder" Edward because Dowell didn't

think [Edward] was wanted in the world, let his confounded tenants, his rifle-associations, his drunkards, reclaimed and unreclaimed, get on as they liked. Not all the hundreds and hundreds of them deserved that that poor devil should go on suffering for their sakes. (229)

Apropos of Dowell's questions in the first chapter about moral uncertainty, the final action of the novel resounds with ethical ambiguity. Is Dowell right or wrong in his decision to allow Edward to kill himself? Dowell justifies his action

by citing Edward's misery and his right to choose to die. But in "trot[ting] off . . . to Leonora" (229) Dowell seems to abandon Edward callously at a moment of crisis. One might look back to the narrative for guidance. Edward's suicide actually occurs before Dowell's telling of the story. Nowhere in his narrative does Dowell show signs of regretting his decision or being disturbed by it. Indeed, Dowell only reveals on the last page of the novel that he anticipated, but chose not to "hinder," Edward's suicide. Applying the standards that make Strether's final ethical choice correct does not clarify the persistent ambiguity of Dowell's position. Despite Dowell's intention to read the "text" of his four-square coterie and judge all available information, in the end Dowell's narrative is still permeated by inconsistencies that impede the reader from knowing how Dowell himself really viewed his conduct. It is arguable that given his psychological fragility, Dowell learned as much about Edward as he could and then acted in good faith by judging the extent of Edward's suffering. At the same time one can maintain that Dowell's frustrated self-delusion and emotional confusion left him with an unresolved anger toward Edward. Thus compelled by vengeance, Dowell abandons Edward to his "pen-knife" (229). And so the sides of the debate multiply. Ford leaves the reader with the irresolvable question of Dowell's ethical conduct. But Ford's pessimism resides not only in the equivocation of Dowell's choice. Ford's bleak vision of the human capacity to formulate ethics based on informed judgment is demonstrated by the position in which he places the reader. Having gained all available knowledge of Dowell, the reader faces an impasse of choices that

frustrates the reader's assumption of responsibility and act of conclusive interpretation. Finally the reader can only admit what Dowell has demonstrated throughout his narrative: the hearts and minds of others are inscrutable.

Ford, of course, foreshadows this conclusion in Dowell's relationship with Nancy. Dowell chooses to care for her during her madness, hoping for her recovery. Aside from two repeated utterances, she remains uncommunicative, leaving Dowell essentially isolated, not physically as Strether is by his ethical choice, but spiritually and emotionally. Again Dowell's position breeds a multiplicity of arguments--one being that Dowell's care of Nancy is his determination to avoid the disturbing reality of life. It is equally reasonable that despite his persistent self-delusion, Dowell learns that the world has no objective set of rules that compose reality and resigns himself to that one overwhelming fact. He recognizes the inevitable inscrutability of others that causes unconquerable isolation and chooses to be with Nancy in her madness, perhaps the most overt condition of inscrutability. In other words, Ford demonstrates that the inescapable subjectivity of truth ultimately defeats the self.

The final positions of Strether and Dowell again raise the issue of illusion. The optimism that guides *The Ambassadors* might be viewed as James's self-delusory need to find ethical certainty in a world where the absence of objective moral truths makes such stability an illusion. Indeed the "illusion of freedom" for which Strether yearns at Gloriani's garden party would seem to be

James's admission that free will, i.e. making informed ethical decisions, is predetermined by limitations of perspective; thus since free will is ever an illusion, so too must be ethical judgment. But Strether's discovery that the "sacred rage," Woollett's prison of moral codes, is relative to those who believe in it, enables him to adjust his own codes and assumptions thereby exercising, if not the freedom to formulate his own ethical conduct, then a belief in the illusion of that freedom that makes it reality. And James demonstrates that ultimately belief creates reality. Thus Strether's belief in his freedom to make moral judgments constitutes ethical stability.

Ironically, the discovery of subjective reality that frees Strether, imprisons Dowell. Because he cannot achieve awareness of his complicity in the illusion of good conduct, Dowell cannot resolve the conflict between illusion and knowledge. He can never be certain that what he knows is not an illusion because he cannot know himself. Dowell's discovery that reality has a "myriad forms" leads him to an awareness of absence that he cannot see beyond. In James's world Dowell himself would be behind that absence; he would be the subject on which reality depends. But in Ford's world, Dowell cannot live, i.e. exist without an objective code of conduct; thus Dowell cannot see behind the absence of that code because he himself is made absent by the knowledge that it is an illusion. In other words, for Dowell knowledge that reality is centered in the self creates the paradoxical position of negating the subject so that he is unable to create a stable sense of reality and truth in which he can believe.

In short James's optimism lies in his equation of subjective reality to the

subject's expanded sense of self. Ford's pessimism lies in his equation of subjective reality to absence of self.



## Works Cited

- Armstrong, Paul. *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford*. Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1987.
- Ford, Madox Ford. *The Good Soldier*. New York: Penguin Books, 1946.
- . *Henry James: A Critical Study*. New York: Octagon Books, 1913.
- Gabbay, Lydia Rivlin. "The Four Square Coterie: A Comparison of Ford Madox Ford and Henry James." *Studies in the Novel* 6 (1974): 439-453.
- Golden, Bruce, and Patricia McFate. "The Good Soldier: A Tragedy of Self-Deception." *Modern Fiction Studies* 9 (1963): 50-60.
- Hood, Richard A. "'Constant Reduction': Modernism and the Narrative Structure of *The Good Soldier*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 14:4 (Spring 1988): 445-464.
- Hynes, Samuel. "The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*." *Sewanee Review* 64 (Spring 1961): 225-235.
- James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. New York: WW Norton and Company, Inc., 1964.
- . "The Art of Fiction." *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*. Eds. James Harry Smith & Edd Winfield Parks. New York: WW Norton & Co., Inc., 1967.
- Kenner, Hugh. "Conrad and Ford." *Gnomon*. New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958, 162-170.
- Nettels, Elsa. *James and Conrad*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1977.
- Nigro, Frank. "Who Framed *The Good Soldier*?: Dowell's Story in Search of a Form." *Studies in the Novel* 4 (1992): 381-391.

- Poole, Roger. "The Real Plot Line of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*: An Essay in Applied Deconstruction." *Textual Practice* 3 (Winter 1990): 390-427.
- Rentz, Kathryn. "The Question of James's Influence on Ford's *The Good Soldier*." *English Literature in Transition* 25 (1982): 104-14, 129-130.
- Schorer, Mark. "An Interpretation." *The Good Soldier*. New York: Vintage Books, 1955: v-xv.
- Seidel, Michael. "The Lone Exile: James's *The Ambassadors* and *The American Scene*." *Exile and the Narrative Imagination*. New Haven: Yale U P, 1986, 131-163.
- Tytell, John. "The Jamesian Legacy in *The Good Soldier*." *Studies in the Novel* 3 (1971): 365-373.
- Wilkinson, Myler. "Henry James and the Ethical Moment." *The Henry James Review* 11 (1990): 153-175.

## VITA

Rebecca Marie Kleinberg

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, September 15, 1966. Graduated from Villa Madonna Academy in Villa Hills, Kentucky, May 1984. Earned B.A. in English and History from Thomas More College; graduated May, 1992. Entered the College of William and Mary in August, 1992.